



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Folsom Field Office
63 Natoma Street
Folsom, CA 95630
www.blm.gov/ca/folsom



EA Number: CA-180-07-19

Proposed Action: Briceburg Administrative Site Well and Septic Improvements

Location: T4S, R18E, Section 10, Mariposa County

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action

1.1 Need for Action

The septic tank and leach field have failed at a BLM-owned house used as quarters for BLM employees along the Merced River. BLM needs to replace the septic tank and relocate the leach field. Additionally, the current water supply for the house and for public use is a spring. This spring has become unreliable in dry years, and may have surface water input. BLM needs to develop a well which would be a more reliable, safe water source for the public and the BLM-owned house.

1.2 Conformance with Applicable Land Use Plans

The proposed action is subject to the 1983 Sierra Planning Area Management Framework Plan (MFP). The proposed action is in the Merced Management Area. Objectives for that area include providing for river oriented and land based recreation opportunities, protection of cultural sites, and management of the Merced River Wilderness Study Area. Because of this area's distance from the Folsom Field Office (three hour drive), ensuring that the BLM-owned house is adequate as living quarters for BLM employees helps administer the MFP's objectives for this area.

2.0 Proposed Action and Alternatives

2.1 Proposed Action

The proposal has two parts: 1) replace the septic tank and relocate the leach field and 2) drill a well to provide a reliable, safe water source.

The old septic tank would be demolished in place and backfilled. The new tank would be placed adjacent to the location of the old tank. Approximately 130' of trenching would be dug for placement of the new septic line leading to the leach field.

The proposed well site is on the north side of the Briceburg Bridge along the old Yosemite Valley Railroad grade just north of the bridge cable anchors and east of Bull Creek Road (see map). This site would have two options for water distribution to the house: 1) Routed in a trench along the railroad grade, up Bull Creek Road and either above or parallel to the new leach field in a sleeved conduit as required by the county. 2) Routed in a trench along the railroad grade, down Bull Creek Road, along the paved Merced River Recreation Area road and to the exiting tank overflow trench. Power for the

well would be supplied from the panel at the house and placed along the distribution lines in conduit. A 7' x 10' chain link enclosure sided with weathered-looking wood/composite paneling will protect the well, pump and electrical components. Chain link will also cover the top of the enclosure. Paneling will be higher than the chain link so that the chain link will not be visible. Three of the four BLM water storage tanks on the hill in the north portion of the project area would be removed to help mitigate visual resource management (VRM) concerns.

2.2 Project Design Features

The most visible component of this project will be the paneled enclosure. This small enclosure will be the only portion of the project that will require visual screening because the other project components will be underground. When completed, redbud and other native shrubs will be planted to visually screen the enclosure from the river and road, mitigating potential visual impacts.

2.3 No Action

BLM would not replace the septic tank, move the leach field, or drill a well.

2.4 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

Four potential well sites on the south side of the river on the benches above the visitor center were considered. However, these were not analyzed in detail because 1) significant cultural resources could be affected; 2) water distribution lines would be very long (more than 800') and difficult/expensive to maintain, especially if they were attached to the underside of the Briceburg Bridge and 3) habitat for the limestone salamander (State listed species) was discovered on the south side of the river close to one of the potential well sites.

3.0 Affected Environment

The project area is on the north side of the Merced River at an elevation 1,150' in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Vegetation is chamise and grey pine with a southern exposure. No unique soil formations exist in the project area. Although the Merced River Canyon supports a number of special status plant species, only Mariposa clarkia (*Clarkia biloba*) occurs near the project area; however, no plants were found in the project area.

The well site, leach field, and new septic tank area were surveyed on March 2, 2007 for special status wildlife species, specifically, limestone salamanders. No salamanders or habitat were found.

The section of the wild and Scenic Merced River that is in the project area is classified as recreational. The ORVs that made the river eligible for wild and scenic status are geology, rare plants, threatened or endangered species, recreation and cultural resources. The project area is in Visual Resource Management (VRM) class II.

This section of the Merced is a popular recreation destination during the late spring and summer. Its proximity to Yosemite National Park makes it an attractive alternative to the crowds of summer, while still being close enough for daily visits to the park. The area offers outstanding whitewater boating in the spring and excellent camping throughout the year.

Three cultural resources are in the project area (see attached section 106 compliance study): the Yosemite Valley Railroad (operated from 1907 to 1945), the original settlement of Briceburg, which

was a store/train depot/post office/freighting office along the railroad (1909 to ca 1927), and Bull Creek Road, which is a segment of Ponderosa Way (built during the 1930s). The Yosemite Valley Railroad was determined to be not eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places because it does not have sufficient integrity. This determination by BLM was accepted by the State Historic Preservation Officer in 1990 (see attachments). The railroad is, however, a Merced Wild and Scenic River outstandingly remarkable value (ORV) (1991 South Fork and Merced Wild and Scenic River Final EIS, p. 21). BLM determined that the original settlement of Briceburg is not eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places because, like the railroad, it lacks sufficient integrity. The segment of Ponderosa Way would not be affected by the proposed action.

4.0 Environmental Effects

The following critical elements have been considered for this environmental assessment, and unless specifically mention later in this chapter, have been determined to be unaffected by the proposal: air quality, areas of critical environmental concern, prime/unique farmlands, floodplains, water quality, threatened or endangered species, hazardous waste, cultural resources, native American concerns, wetlands and riparian zones, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness, invasive, nonnative weeds, and environmental justices.

4.1 Impacts of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

Soil disturbance will be minimal due to the small scale of the project, and construction practices will minimize dust during construction by watering. Excavated or trenched soils will be compacted. The project will not affect special status animal species because no populations or habitat for special status species were found.

This project will have temporary impacts to recreation including a temporary road closure, noise associated with construction, dust and soil disturbance and temporary visual disturbance. Temporary disturbance to recreational users may occur. Temporary road closures will occur during project activities over a 10 day period. The road would be opened every 30 minutes to allow recreational traffic to pass. None of these minor adverse impacts will be long term. This project will have long term benefits by providing a safe, reliable water supply for visitors.

The well head enclosure will have some visual impacts, but will not change the VRM classification for this area. It will be visible from the river, Railroad Grade, and Hwy 140. However, the weathered-looking wood paneling will be designed to blend in with the existing visual background. Furthermore, the project area already contains many structures, electrical and phone wires, roads, bridges and signs. The visual impacts associated with well and septic work will be minimal and consistent with the existing character of the area. These impacts will be mitigated by planting native species to screen the pump house from the view of the river, Railroad Grade and Hwy 140.

This project was reviewed for its potential effects on the Merced Wild and Scenic River. The project will not affect water quality or flows. The project will not affect geology or special status species ORVs for the Merced Wild and Scenic River. Adverse impacts to the recreational ORV will be short term and will not prevent visitors from boating or camping along the river. Long term impacts to recreation will be beneficial through the development of a safe, reliable water source.

This project will have a minor negative effect on the Yosemite Valley Railroad ORV because the size of the visual impact on the railroad grade would be very small (all septic improvements are underground and the well enclosure would be small—7'x10') compared to the scale of the railroad

grade which extends for miles from Merced to El Portal. Well drilling and trenching would occur on the railroad grade. The well building would be visually intrusive and out of character with the railroad's original setting. However, this impact would be minimized by making the building as small as possible and by painting it and planting native species to blend with the existing natural setting in the project area. Furthermore, the surface of the area trenched would be returned to its preexisting appearance by backfilling and compacting the soil.

The project area has already been impacted by modern buildings, roads, etc. built on and adjacent to the railroad grade. The well site is adjacent to private property, where a modern house has been built directly on the railroad grade and rock-lined terraces where the Brice store/train depot/post office were located. A portion of the grade has been converted into a road for accessing recreation areas further downstream. Clearly, the integrity of this stretch of railroad grade has already been compromised by the modern house and the conversion of the railroad into a road. The project area does not contain a well-preserved stretch of the railroad grade. The well and well building, because of their small size, would not noticeably contribute to existing integrity problems for the historic railroad grade.

4.2 Impacts of the No Action Alternative

If the project were not conducted, there would be no impacts to special status species or the Yosemite Valley Railroad ORV. The no action alternative would negatively affect recreation use because the water supply would continue to be limited and would be at risk for contamination due to use of surface water. The need for the project, water and sanitation, are basic to visitors' health and enjoyment of public lands. Without this project the public's ability to use this recreation resource will be limited.

4.3 Cumulative Impacts

Because there are no site specific adverse impacts expected for soils or special status species, no cumulative impacts are expected at a larger scale. Slight, short term impacts to recreation are expected during project construction. However, there are no other known disruptions of recreation use in the larger area to which this small impact may cumulatively contribute. Small impacts are expected to visual resources and the Yosemite Valley Railroad grade ORV. However, these impacts are not expected to be discernible from existing impacts that have resulted from the presence of a house and a high use recreation road on visuals and the section of the railroad grade in the project area.

5.0 Agencies and Persons Consulted

5.1 BLM Interdisciplinary Team

- Jeff Horn, Recreation
- Jeff Babcock, Engineering
- Al Franklin, Soils and Botany
- Peggy Cranston, Wildlife and Fisheries
- James Barnes, Cultural Resources

5.2 Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

The EA, posted on Folsom Field Office's website (www.blm.gov/ca/folsom) under Information, NEPA (or available upon request), will be available for a 15-day public review period. Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment – including your personal identifying

information – may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so. Comments should be sent to the BLM at 63 Natoma Street, Folsom, CA 95630 or emailed to us at ca180@ca.blm.gov.